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Hearts of Green and Gold

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For many on Cularin, the coming of the Clone Wars is the harbinger of a conflict beyond their imaginings. For others, it is almost a sense of peace, of closure. The Tarasin, long the keepers of wisdom and ancient lore on their verdant planet, can sense the Force in a profound way. Through that connection to all life, they have known for millennia the intricate ebb and flow of the powers that nurture all things. The reptilian warders of Cularin have long understood the path their lives have led, generation after generation, as the keeper of all life on their world.

They have lived in pursuit of their purpose, their reason for being. And now, at last, their day of reckoning is at hand...

The tension in the glade was so thick, even the youngest of the assembly could tell their elders were upset. This was the largest gathering of irstat leaders in remembered history, and as harsh words and dangerous displays of irritation continued to escalate, everyone present became repeatedly reminded why such a conclave were never called before.

A select few in the assembly knew that this was not entirely true. A few months before, most of these elders were present for a secret ritual cast on behalf of Mother Darianna of the Hiironi tribe. Her wisdom was never questioned before, and when she called out for support from the other irstats, none of their leaders could refuse her request. So well loved and revered was she, the eldest of the Tarasin race, that her word was all even warring leaders needed to set aside their feuds and come together in peace.

Unfortunately, things changed since then. Since the Great Ritual was invoked, numerous powerful Tarasin were missing or killed. Since the Great Ritual, more than two hundred kilometers of forest around the twin cities of Gadrin and Hedrett were burned in an "industrial" accident. Since then, hundreds of Humans with armor and weapons descended from the sky from their huge starships to "secure" their world.

Even those tribes most closely allied with the Hiironi were upset with Mother Darianna over these changes. Those already opposed to her were outright furious. Even a pouchling could see that the fury present at this meeting marked it as less of the ritual gathering she called for and more like a war council.

"Age has not made you wiser. It has driven you insane." The speaker elicited a score of flaring crests and darkening body colors around him, but even that reaction was very telling of the assembly's mood. The Tarasin changed colors to show emotion, and from the shades of the figures around

Father Tiirtha, there was surprise at his insolence but no real disagreement.

As always, Mother Darianna remained impassive and did not betray even the slightest shift in her hue. The long years might have dulled her scales and her eyesight, but her skills at diplomacy were as razor honed as ever. "Please," she said in a polite voice, "go on."

Even Tiirtha had expected more of a response, more of a rise to his verbal challenge. Taken aback, he paused just long enough for her to speak again without breaking the unspoken rules of decorum that defined a tribal meeting.

"I only ask what everyone here, including yourself, agreed to last year when we stood in conclave on this very spot. Is it madness to expect you to keep your word?"

That move he had expected. Indeed, he and the others here in support of his tribe had rehearsed their response to perfection. As their chosen speaker, he was ready with his answer. "We agreed to come back and finish what we started for the good of Cularin. But look around you, Great Mother. Our world is at its weakest, and you ask us to weaken our people even more. We agreed to protect all life, but look at what the lives outside our green planet have done to us."

She watched him gesture toward the stars, just as she knew he would. She watched the colors shift on the people assembled in the grove, just as she knew they would. This entire debate and the hostilities that might come of it were all foreseen long ago. When she agreed to walk this path, she always knew that it would lead here, to the moment that would make or break her entire race.

One misstep and war would break out between the tribes. Not another border dispute that left a handful dead and hundreds more swearing a scale-feud, but outright war embroiling every irstat and private hold across Cularin. War was in the air, in the very song of the universe, and even the Tarasin could not escape its violent, siren call.

That is to say, they could not escape it without help. The human Lanius had pledged his support, his very life if it came to that, to protect her world. It was time for her to do the same. This was the pact she formed with the dark one that had come on Lanius' behalf; now she had to honor her words.

Over the din of angry hisses and the scintillating display of furious hues, Darianna said the one thing that would make her collected people all fall silent. She spoke the only four words that could quiet even her most vicious opponents.

"I will step down."

Somewhere, hundreds of yards away, a single leaf fell from a branch and landed on the lush undergrowth. Everyone in the grove could hear it; the silence was like a tomb. Remembering his wits eventually, Tiirtha was the first to speak. Even with his ambitions and his drive for power, his first words were only those of shock. "You will step down?"

She nodded gravely knowing how many of her race present wanted nothing more than for her to move aside and let someone more aggressive adopt her place. She prayed the wisdom of the Jedi Human was right. If Qel-Bertuk was wrong, her people would march on the alien settlements by sunrise.

"Yes, I will step down, but I ask for two things. Allow me to remain long enough to see the Great Rite finished with the closing of this year."

The whispers and hissing began again, but her shocking announcement still had most of those present too dumbfounded to speak at all. Tiirtha saw his opportunity to emerge as a strong and wise leader. Speaking above the throng, he made the decision she counted on. "Done, Revered Mother. It is wrong of us to deny you your final wish." Those who knew him best could tell just how much he relished the word "final."

"Secondly, I ask that you follow my leadership unquestioningly until that time ends. We need to be a united people until the turn of the year and I hand my seat over to Father Tiirtha."

A second leaf, even farther away, fluttered to the ground. Again, everyone heard it. In more decades than any of them cared to count, Mother Darianna had never appointed a successor. While she was technically only the Mother of a single irstat, her power and wisdom made her a sort of unofficial guide for the entire race. Technically, she had no seat to give up, but everyone accepted that she had one and that she had just declared who would fill it when she was done.

Everyone in the clearing was stunned, especially Tiirtha himself. He was, again, the first to recover. His ambitions were always known to Darianna, but she also saw within him the potential to be a great leader. He was too ambitious and even impetuous, but in his heart, she knew him to be a compassionate Father with the interests of the Tarasin as his first priority. Thus, she was a little saddened to have to use him like this.

"The Revered Mother has spoken. Are there any here that would deny her?"

And that was the moment of truth. If even a single voice spoke against Tiirtha in this instant, it would all come crashing down. Darianna listened, each passing heartbeat an eternity that thundered in her aged chest. After a full minute of silence passed, she dared to breathe again.

"Then your requests are heard and granted, Wise One. We, your people, are yours to command until the last day of the last Moon of Reaping." Intent on leading by example, Tiirtha did something even she had not foreseen. He folded his proud crests and kneeled. "What would you have of us?"

Like a wave of green and gold, the colors of respect and acceptance, the Tarasin before her all followed suit. If the years had not long ago dried out her eyes, she would have wept. Instead, she bowed in return and gestured for them to rise. "I only ask for now that my last days with you be ones of peace. Please, my brothers and sisters, drop your weapons and join with me in ritual."
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The sound of spear and knives and rifles falling to the grass was utterly deafening. In all her life, Darianna never heard anything so beautiful.